MUSIC NEWS

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Yoko Ono and Her Sixteen-Track Voice

Yoko is a delicate wind, racing around the world and trying to keep from disappearing altogether

By **JONATHAN COTT**

Yoko Ono at home in the United Kingdom.

Michael Putland/Getty Images

In December, 1970, John Lennon and Yoko Ono came to New York City – their first time as a couple – where they visited some of Yoko's old friends, went out, as they rarely do in London, to some "entertainment" films like *Diary of a Mad Housewife* and *Lovers and Other Strangers* and to the Muhammad Ali fight, made two new films – *Up Your Legs Forever* and *The Fly* – for inclusion in a three night John and Yoko minifilm festival at the Elgin Theater, and did some publicity for their two extraordinary new albums.

The following scene takes place in a hotel room one Sunday evening: John is turning on the radio to hear Alex Bennett's WMCA phone-in program on which tonight he's playing tracks from Yoko's album – the first time Yoko's music has been featured on AM radio.

"There are people who are going to love it and people who are going to hate it," Bennett says enthusiastically. "I think that in 1980 music will probably sound like this. Here's a track called "Why," so phone in and tell us what you think of it."

“It’s Today’s Tutti Frutti,” John writes on a note pad, so as not to interrupt the music.
“I’m 49 years old,” a listerner phones in, after listening to “Why Not.” “Forty-nine and I dig it. I heard trains, going through a tunnel, then rain – I’m just using my imagination – then what soulded like a bunch of Indians. I dig it, but I really like songs with a melody.”
“It was truly disastrous,” a nasal-voiced listener calls up to say.
“It’s music, you idiot!” John exclaims to the radio. “Because it’s not got da-da-da, there’s nothing for him to hook onto.”
“You don’t mind hearing the program?” Yoko asks.
“I want to,” John says. “You see, with Yoko’s and my album, we’re both looking at the same thing from different sides of the table. Mine is literate, hers is revolutionary.”
“Paper Shoes” comes on the air with its train sounds.
“On one side, at the end of ‘Why Not,’ you’re in the train itself.”
“Life is a train, and train is a life,” Yoko says.
“The shadows of a train of thought,” someone mutters in the hotel corridor outside.
“She’s got a 16-track voice,” adds John.
The radio program ends, and John and Yoko are relaxing on their bed, John half-watching the soundless television screen and reading an essay called “Concept Art” by violinist and composer Henry Flynt whom John and Yoko have just visited in New York.
“The notion of a concept,” John is reading, “is a vestige of the notion of a platonic form (the thing which e.g., all tables have in common: tableness), which notion is replaced by the notion of a name objectively, metaphysically related to its intention (so that all tables now have in common their objective relation to *table*).”

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“Before I met John,” Yoko is saying, “and when I had become sort of famous because of my bottoms film shots of 365 backsides for one hour, a film John describes as *Many Happy Endings,* that was the loneliest time in my life. Some people resented me because of my fame and made me feel isolated. Now when my record is played on the radio, I’ve got someone who’s pleased.
“When I met John originally, he said it was OK for me to listen to the Beatles’ sessions . . . “
John: “I had to get permission!”
“So I asked John, why don’t you use different rhythms, not just going ba-ba- ba-ba. It was a kind of avant-garde snobbery on my part, because my voice was going [vibrating: uhghh . . . ghuhhh], but there was no beat. So I thought to myself (simpering tone) ‘Well, simple music!’ You see, I was doing music of the mind – no sound at all, and everybody sitting around just imagining sounds. At the Chamber Street Loft concerts I was throwing peas from a bag at the people and I had long hair and I was circling my hair and the movement was a sound. Even then, some people were saying that maybe it was too dramatic. Then there was my Wall Piece which instructed you to hit the wall with your head, and that was called too dramatic as well. But I felt stifled even with that, I was dying to scream, to go back to my voice. And I came to a point where I believed that the idea of avant-garde purity was just as stifling as just doing a rock beat over and over.”
“Dear,” John interrupts, “one thing that’s going to throw you. Henry Flynt is talking about ‘Sweets from My Sweet’ by the Drifters; he’s been rocking for a long time. You know, he played us some fantastic stuff the other night when we saw him. ‘Sweets from My Sweet’ was a big rock and roll hit, so he’s been aware of that for a long time. I don’t think he got to that sound pissing about with mathematics. I had to interrupt since I was just reading something he wrote about concept

art and it's bloody hard, but he gets to 'Sweets from My Sweet' and I understood him."
"Probably I was the only one who didn't hear it," Yoko says.
"Right," says John, singing, "Dun de dun dun! I'm not putting you down, I'm just very surprised to read this."
"I know you mean well," Yoko replies, "but I get sort of lost."
"You were talking about the 4/4 beat."
"I realized," Yoko continues, "that the classics, when they went from 4/4 to 4/3, lost the heart beat. It's as if they left the ground and lived on the 40th floor. Schoenberg and Webern – Webern's on the top of the Empire State Building. But that's all right. Our conceptual rhythm got complex, but we still have the body and the beat. Conceptual rhythm I carry on with my voice, which has a very complicated rhythm even in 'Why,' but the bass and the drum is the heartbeat. So the body and the conceptual rhythms go together. These days I'm putting a beat under everything I do."
"Yoko and I have clashed artistically," John laughs. "Our egos have smashed once or twice. But if I know what I'm doing as an artist, then I can see if I'm being hypocritical in my reactions. I sometimes am overawed by her talent. I think, fuck, I better watch out, she *is* taking over, I better get myself in here. And I say, are you taking over? And then say all right, all right, and I relax again. I mean, she's going to haul 365 legs and make a bloody film about a fly crawling over some woman's body, what is it? But it's all right, I know her."
"An artist couple is the most difficult thing," Yoko continues. "On the David Frost program, some guy was saying, 'I like to write music and my fiance likes to write poetry.' The fact is that we both paint, compose, and write poetry, and on that basis, I think we're doing pretty well."
"If you do two LPs there might be a little change!" John laughs. "But until then I don't mind. When she wants the A side, that's when we start fighting. The reason the covers of our albums are similar is that I wanted us to be separate and to be together, too, not to have it appear

that old John-and-Yoko is over, because they're dying for us to fall apart, for God knows what reason. It's just that everybody doesn't want anybody else to be happy, because nobody's happy."
"I think it's a miracle that we're doing all right. But we are doing all right, don't you think, John?"
"It's just handy to fuck your best friend. That's what it is. And once I resolved the fact that it was a woman as well, it's all right. We go through the trauma of life and death every day so it's not so much of a worry about what sex we are anymore. I'm living with an artist who's inspiring me to work. And you know, Yoko is the most famous unknown artist. Everybody knows her name, but nobody knows what she does."

Yoko (the Japanese word for "ocean child") Ono ("small field") was born in 1933 and stands five feet two, weighs ninety-five pounds, more or less. "It is nice to keep oneself small," she once wrote, "like a grain of rice, instead of expanding. Make yourself dispensable, like paper. See little, hear little, and think little."
Her life in Japan as the daughter of a patrician family – a banker father, a beautiful hostess mother – which was dispossessed after the war, her education at a school that was the aristocratic equivalent of Eton which was attended also by Crown Prince Akihito and the late brilliant novelist Mishima who had committed hari-kari ("I knew him," Yoko says, "and he was as popular as Mick Jagger in Japan"), her *Gone with the Wind* life during the war when she was selling jewels for food from farmers in the country – and her relationships with her two previous husbands – Tochi Ichiyanagi and Antony Cox, all have been recounted in several magazines, most recently in *Esquire*, in which she is quoted as saying: "I saw that nothing was permanent. You don't want to possess anything that is dear to you because you might lose it. So I became extremely disinterested in

anything material, or in any relationship, in fact. I just kept everything sort of far away."

She seems to like the color *yellow* ("If the butterflies in your stomach die, send yellow death announcements to your friends"), *snow* ("Send snow sounds to a person you like"; "Walk in the snow without making footprints"; "Find a hand in the snow" – "Three More Snow Pieces for Nam June Paik"), and *wind* ("Make a hole. Leave it in the Wind" – "Painting for the Wind"). The biography she once wrote describes one self image:

born: Bird Year
early childhood: collected skys
adolescence: collected sea-weeds
late adolescence: gave birth to a grapefruit, collected snails, clouds, garbage cans etc.
Have graduated many schools specializing in these subjects.

"I dropped out in my third year at Sarah Lawrence," Yoko narrates, "and I started living in New York around 86th and Amsterdam where all the trucks go all the time. I came from a place like Scarsdale, and my new life was very exciting for me, because I was living next to a meat market and I felt as if I had a house with a delicatessen in it. The only thing is that I couldn't figure out how to present my work because I didn't know how to communicate with people. And I didn't know how to explain to people how shy I was. When people visited I wanted to be in a big sort of box with little holes where nobody could see me, but I could see through the holes. So later, that developed into my Bag Piece where you can be inside, and see outside, but they can't see you.

"When I was going to Sarah Lawrence, I was mainly staying in the music library and listening to Schoenberg and Webern; they thrilled me, really. And I was writing some serial works at that time. But I was lazy writing out a whole score. And further I was doing the Match Piece in those days, just lighting the match and watching until it disappeared. And I even thought that maybe there was something in me that was going to go crazy, like a pyromaniac. See, I was writing

poetry and music and painting, and none of that satisfied me; I knew that the medium was wrong. Whenever I wrote a poem, they said it was too long, it was like a short story; a novel was like a short story, and a short story was like a poem. I felt that I was like a misfit in every medium.

"I just stayed in Scarsdale at my parents' home, and I was going crazy because I could not communicate with them very well. I was lighting matches, afraid of becoming a pyromaniac. But then I thought that there might be some people who needed something more than painting, poetry, and music, something I called an 'additional act' that you needed in life. And I was doing all that just to prevent myself from going mad, really. And when I had this apartment in New York, what happened was that instead of drying my face with a towel, I used my best cocktail dress. And then I was imagining myself all the time as a kite, holding on to a kite, and when I was sleeping, I'd lose my string, go off floating. That's the time I thought: I'll go crazy. So I just imagined myself holding on to a kite, and the kite was me.

"People asked me what I was doing. I didn't know how to explain that actually I was just holding the string, making sure that I wouldn't let go. This was a trait I had when I was a little girl, too, when my mother asked me what I was doing all by myself, and I would say: I'm breathing, and I was really counting my breathings, and thinking: 'My God, if I don't count them, would I not breathe?' That later became my Breathing Piece. And those events that I was doing in New York were very much connected with necessity."

This sense of disappearing, flying away, flames going out, suggests what David Cooper writes about in his brilliant and disturbing *The Death of the Family,* the effort *not* to see oneself anymore, "to see through oneself as a person limited to relative being . . . Few people can sustain this nonrelative self-regard for more than one minute or two without feeling that they are going mad in the sense of disappearing. That is why people use mirrors in order not to see their selves with the possibility of seeing through, but to see fragmentary

manifestations like their hair, eye make-up, and so on. If one did not effect their evasive fragmentation of the mirror image, one would be left with the experience of knowing that seeing oneself means seeing through oneself. There can be nothing more terrifying than that."
"Draw a line with yourself," Yoko writes in her Line Piece. "Go on drawing until you disappear." Many of these "pieces" are printed in *Grapefruit* (Simon and Shuster) – compositions of "Music, Painting, Event, Poetry, and Object" – in which the idea of dismembering and disrobing is seminal. Thus in one of her Events, Yoko asks each participant to cut off a piece of her dress until she is naked. And one remembers John and Yoko naked on the cover of *Two Virgins* and in their two *Self-Portrait* films. Yoko once wrote: "People went on cutting the parts they do not like of me finally there was only the stone remained of me that was in me but they were still not satisfied and wanted to know what it's like in the stone." The point is that the act of taking off one's clothes is merely a metaphor for the uncovering of the self.
And what does it mean to be "naked"? The American sociologist Erving Goffman writes: "The self is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented." And Yoko finally existed in her "scene" by means of a fantastic humor, by transforming her obsessions, memories, and ideas into her special art, and thus realizing herself in her work. *"Grapefruit* was like a cure for myself without knowing it. It was like saying, 'Please accept me, I am mad.' Those instructions are like that – a real need to do something to act out your madness. As long as you are behaving properly, you don't realize your madness and you go crazy." She was accepted also by someone who once sang: "I am he as you are he as you are me as we are all together."
Yoko once wrote: "After unblocking one's mind, by dispensing with visual, auditory and kinetic perceptions, what will come out of us?

Would there be anything? I wonder. And my Events are mostly spent in wonderment."

Before they are anything else, Yoko's poems, events, films, and music exemplify a wonderment which, in some accepted way, suggests childlike awe, a way of seeing things as if you were entering a strange street, invisible until now, for the first time; or as if, for example, you were watching a Western – the sheriff, rustlers, corral fights – through the eyes of one of the horses. More than that, wonderment implies intensity of perception resulting in one's identification with what is seen, not as the "utterly other," but as the utterly same. Thus the inescapable modality of the visible becomes the numinous. And eventually, through hyperesthesia, the perceived object or person disintegrates, for when you see something at this level of clarity, it disappears, and you find yourself asking, what really is there? ("Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same as 'I eat what I see'."

David Cooper writes: "To commence the unuse of the word 'neurosis,' let us regard it as a way of being that is made to seem childish by one's fear of others about one's becoming childlike . . . The fear is the fear of madness, of being childlike or even being before-one's-origins, so that any act may cohere others against oneself to suppress spontaneous gesture that has socially conceptive, archaic resonances."

The childlike gestures and awarenesses reveal themselves in Yoko's ways of seeing everything: "An intensity of a wink is: two cars smashed head on./A storm turned into a breeze./A water drop from a loose faucet" ("Wink Talk"). And in her "Touch Poem," Yoko writes: "Give birth to a child/See the world through its eye/Let it touch everything possible/and leave its fingermark there/in place of a signature."

"Sometimes," Yoko says, "I think that some of the things I've done could have been done by John, and vice versa." Together they have

collaborated on a number of lovely films (distributed in the US by Film Makers' Cooperative) which, among other things, seem to be about seeing things as if for the first time – the "love that has no past."
§ *Two Virgins* shows both of their faces superimposed, separating and merging, revealing love to be the interpenetration of anima and animus; and this scene is followed by a slow motion kiss of the lovers limned against the sky. "When we met," Yoko recalls, "we were so involved with each other that we couldn't see anybody around us. We were just looking at each other and sometimes noticed that people were around us. We didn't have time or space to consider what we looked like to others. We were really in a dream."
§ *Apotheosis* is filmed by a camera floating gently upwards in a balloon, rising above a snowy English village, the sounds of dogs barking carried up by the snow fading into the sounds of the wind, as the camera watches the white radiant particles of clouds vibrating on the screen – and then suddenly looks up to the sun.
§ *Up Your Legs Forever,* made in New York in one day, shows 331 pairs of legs (those of New York artists, friends of John's and Yoko's, and their friends, all legs donated for one dollar and Peace) shot from the toes up to the thigh. The film forces you to see how different one leg is from its partner and how leg dimples, moles, and scratches suggest idiosyncratic leg personalities, while at the same time the movie exorcises almost anyone's fetishist leg fantasy forever. "When we're counted as legs," Yoko says, "we're very ordinary. We wanted to show we have peaceful legs. And legs are peaceful."
§ *Rape* wonders what would happen if a person were followed by a camera to distraction. The camera tracks a German girl through a cemetery, down London streets, into a fiat where she runs around screaming "Why me?" At the Elgin Theater, the audience not only waited angrily for the "real" rape, which never came, but also felt raped by the film's progression as they screamed and called for help, hoping the projector would breakdown.

§ *Number Five* has John smiling for one hour. His smile was shot with a high speed camera (20,000 frames per minute) often used to film rockets. A three-minute smile was then slowed down to its present length. “It originally started out,” John says, “that Yoko wanted a million people all over the world to to send in a snapshot of themselves smiling, and then it got down to lots of people smiling, and then maybe one or two and then me smiling as a symbol of today smiling. And so it’s me smiling, and that’s the hang-up of course because it’s me again. But I mean they’ve got to see it someday – it’s only me. The idea of the film won’t be dug for another fifty or a hundred years probably. That’s what it’s all about. I just happen to be that face.”

§ *The Fly,* John’s and Yoko’s most recent film made in New York in two days, shows a naked woman lying motionless on her back as one fly at a time settles on different parts of her body to go about its business – mainly legs tasting and feeling. Some of the flies were stunned with CO^2, having failed to keep calm on sugar water. The woman’s catatonia remains a mystery.

It’s as if Walt Disney and Jean-Marie Straub had collaborated, for the film’s magnified focus on what a fly does if you don’t brush it off is shot in long takes with the camera obliquely observing the transformed landscape of a mountainous breast, a hillock nipple, or a desert of fingers on which a fly stands, legs investigating the scene. At the film’s conclusion, you see a long shot of the entire body, seven flies standing here and there, as if on a dead Christ. And this amazing Bunuellian shot implies the idea of the fly as a metaphor for pain. The flies finally fly away, and we’re left with a shot through the window of a New York Bowery roof, veiled in a diaphanous blue light like St. Elmo’s fire, suggesting the beauty of seeing things anew.

“The idea of the film came to me,” Yoko says, “when I thought about that joke where someone says to a man: ‘Did you notice that woman’s hat?’ and he’s looking at her bosom instead. I wondered how many people would look at the fly or at the body. I tried when filming to

accept all the things that showed up, but at the same time tried not to make the film too dramatic. It would have been very easy for me to have made it become pornographic, and I didn't want that. Each shot had to project more than a pretty image of a body, so it was used more as an abstract line."

Yoko's voice on *The Fly's* soundtrack is a subtle rhythmic embodiment of the fly's excursions – intersected by John's forward and backward guitar track. And these amazing sounds reveal again those childlike gestures and archaic resonances. For it is most obviously in what John calls her "16-track voice" that Yoko displays her extraordinary art. It is the true distillation of her *sens plus pur,* a kind of psychophysical instrument of amazing disparateness, richness, and range. Yoko's voice is a kind of vocal tachysto-scope (the shuttered magic lantern that projects images for a thousandth of a second), immediately and almost subliminally communicating glittering movements of the smallest elements of sound, reminding you of the screams, wails, laughter, groans, caterwauls of both a primordial, pre-birth, pre-mammalian past, as well as of the fogged-over painted immedicacy of childhood.

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usically, what happens is that nasals, fricatives, registral variants, pitch inflections, and varying timbres all combine, interpolate, and permute to convey the impression of anything from a Japanese *shakuhachi* to bantams in pine woods to swamp animals' madrigals to the feeling of being inside of one's own body cavities. Yoko's voice enters sound to reveal its most basic frequential characteristics and proposes to the listener that if he wants to hear, he might as well stop trying. "She becomes her voice," John says, "and you get touched." This vocal quality can be heard most powerfully on "Don't Worry Kyoko (Mummy's only looking for her hand in the snow)," the soundtrack for *The Fly,* and her new album on which Yoko is

supported by John on guitar, Klaus Voorman on bass, Ringo on drums; and, on “AOS” by Charles Haden, David Izenzon, Ed Blackwell, and Ornette Coleman. Yoko thus brings together and combines the best elements of rock, recent jazz tone roads, and avant-garde musical materials, using them to sustain her adventurous realizations.

With the exceptions of “Paper Shoes” and “Greenfield Morning,” which Yoko constructed from one or two lines and then edited and reassembled and added some overdubbing, all the songs in the album are performed and recorded live, most in one session without, it’s hard to believe, any voice transformation except for the slightest of echoes.

“First of all,” Yoko explains, “John and I were going to make individual LPs, and John started his session first. When he was recording, I was in the control room. Sometimes he had to fool around with his instrument just to get inspired or to get into his music, and I’d be thinking, well, he should be doing his song, not fooling about – that’s the feeling you get in the control room – but he just kept jamming and then suddenly I realized how beautiful the jamming was. He started something very unusual with the guitar like (high-pitched call). So I couldn’t help it, I had to join them. John had said: ‘whenever you feel like joining, join us, and all I have to say is no if I don’t want it.’ In ‘Why,’ he inspired me, an I jumped into the room. John sang ‘Eyugh-eyugh!’ He was trying to tell me to get in and join them, and I just joined in. I liked the idea of improvisation, going somewhere you don’t know, just having something vague planned, like doing something that’s slow or quiet and the rest of it decided by the wind or whatever. So I went in and started to scream, and then John’s guitar was going along frantic. And I realized that John and I have a very mean streak, it was similar in that sense. There’s something about us that’s saying: Fuck you, I couldn’t care less, and I go mad with my voice and John does it with his guitar. Both of us have that side.”

“I have that side,” John says, “but it’s hard to get it on a two minute single with a technician like George sitting around.”

“You see,” Yoko continues, “it became a dialogue, we stimulated each other. You don’t know who inspired whom, it just goes on. Klaus told me later that he’d realized that I knew about rhythm perfectly, it was right on spot. Of course I knew. In Toronto, Klaus and Ringo were pretty silent about what I was doing, but this time they got really turned on.

“When I say things I stutter a little bit. Most of us kill off our real emotions, and on top of them you have your smooth self. It’s like the guy in the film *Diary of a Mad Housewife* with his sing-song voice. There’s that unreal tone. But when I want to say ‘I’m sorry’ in a song – because music to me is something so honest and so real – I don’t feel like saying (sing-song) ‘I’m sorry, mother,’ but rather as an emotion should be (groaning, stuttering) ‘I’m so-or-orrrrry.’ A stutterer is someone who’s feeling something genuine. So in ‘Paper Shoes’ I say: ‘Pa-pa-pa-a-a-per sh-shooooooes!’

“The older you get the more frustrated you feel. And it gets to a point where you don’t have time to utter a lot of intellectual bullshit. If you were drowning you wouldn’t say: ‘I’d like to be helped because I have just a moment to live.’ You’d say, ‘Help!’ but if you were more desperate you’d say, ‘Eiough-hhhhh,’ or something like that. And the desperation of life is really life itself, the core of life, what’s really driving us forth. When your’re really desperate it’s phony to use descriptive and decorative adjectives to express yourself.”

But isn’t there another side, such as the seeming gentleness of “Who Has Seen the Wind?” – the quiet little song Yoko presents on the B side of John’s “Instant Karma”?

For drop caps:

“On that song,” Yoko says, “the voice is wavering a little, there are shrills and cracks, it’s not professional pop singing, the background is going off a little. There was something of a lost little girl about it. What I was aiming at was the effect you get in Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck,* where the drunkard sings, a slightly crazed voice, a bit of a broken toy. In that sense it was a quiet desperation.”

Religion is what you do with your aloneness, a philosopher once said. Or with your pain and desperation, one could add. Yoko's music pushes pain into a kind of invigorating and liberated energy, just as a stutterer finally gives birth to a difficult word, since it existed orginally at the fine edge between inaudibility and the sound waves of dreams. About her music for *The Fly,* she says, "It's nice to go into that very very fine intricate mixture of sounds and rhythm. It's almost like going into a dream, getting something that doesn't exist in the physical world, unutterable sounds – a kind of metaphysical rhythm."

What Yoko calls "metaphysical sound" seems at first to be the true opposition of her recent unblocked music. Yet it is less an opposition than the idea of the dream of sound from which her new art emerges, a music which Max Picard tells us is "silence, which in dreaming begins to sound."

Yoko's "Music of the Mind" – e.g., "Peel. Peek. Take off." ("Pieces for Orchestra," 1962) – came to fruition in the winter of 1960. She rented a loft on Chambers Street in New York. "All the windows were smoked glass so that you couldn't really see outside, but there was the skylight, and when you were in the loft you almost felt more connected to the sky than to the city outside. It was a cold water flat, $50.50, and it was great. I didn't have chairs or beds, and so people downstairs gave me orange crates and I put all the crates together to make a large table, crates for the chairs, and at night I just collected them and made a bed out of them. And I started to live there.

"A friend of mine told me that there was a group of artists who were thinking of putting on their works and would I mind if they joined me and did things together. And I said, no, I wouldn't mind, and perhaps they wouldn't mind painting my loft for free. But everyone was lazy and didn't get around to painting it white, but I got used to the grey."

The famous Chambers Street loft concerts featured artists, musicians, poets, a list of whose names reads like a roster of the avant garde hall of fame: Ray Johnson, Walter De Maria, Joseph Byrd, Al Hansen, LaMonte Young, Jackson MacLow, Iris Levak, George Maciunas, Phillip Corner, George Brecht, Diane Wakoski, Simone Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Terry Jennings, Bob Morris, Henry Flynt, David Tudor, and Richard Maxfield.

"But there was no mention that I should have a concert there, and I wasn't going to be the one to mention it," Yoko says. "Somehow my work was still suffering. The idea had been to stop my suffering by getting a place to present my work and at last letting everybody know what I was doing. But it just went on like that. Many people thought that I was a very rich girl who was just 'playing avant-garde.' And some others thought that I was a mistress of some very rich man, which wasn't true either. I think that the reason that some people thought the whole thing was organized by some Chinese man was because La Monte's name is Young. And meanwhile I was just surviving by teaching Japanese folk art."

Within the next couple of years, Yoko had concerts featuring her own work at the Village Gate, the Bridge Theater, and Carnegie Recital Hall. Her first art exhibition took place at the Agnus Gallery, owned by Fluxus originator George Maciunas. And among the instruction paintings there were: "Painting for the Wind," which featured a bag full of seeds hanging in front of a blank canvas, and when the wind blew, seeds would fall out through the bag's small holes; "Smoke Painting," where you lit a match and watched the smoke against the canvas; and "Painting to Be Stepped On," where you stepped on the canvas and made a mark until many marks made up the painting. It was this element of participation, of adding things, of watching things grow and change that enabled you to see Yoko's instructions as a way of "getting together, as in a chain letter." And following this exhibition, Yoko's lecture-concert at Wesleyan College, events in Japan, exhibitions in London like the one on 1966 at the Indica Gallery where

she met John, all created a growing interest in her work and an equal amount of incomprehension.

And it was Yoko's and John's extensions of the idea of participating, the "additional act" that would suggest to others how reciprocally to involve *themselves,* that led to the famous Peace events, filmed and reported on many times – the Bed-Ins, the "War is Over" poster that appeared in hundreds of newspapers around the world, and the sending of acorns to world leaders, who were invited by John and Yoko to plant them and watch them grow.

Yoko's first important concert took place at the end of 1961 at Carnegie Recital Hall. "It was a big moment for me," Yoko recalls. "George Brecht, Jonas Mekas, LaMonte Young, Jackson MacLow, just about everyone performed in it. And Richard Maxfield helped me on the electronic side. I set up everything and then made the stage very dim, so you had to strain your eyes – because life is like that. You always have to strain to read other people's minds. And then it went into complete darkness. The week before I had given instructions to everyone as to what they should do, so that there would be a feeling of togetherness but a togetherness based on alienation, since no one knew the other person's instructions.

"So everybody was moving without making any sounds on stage. There was a point where two men were tied up together with lots of empty cans and bottles around them, and they had to move from one end of the stage to the other very quietly and slowly without making any sounds. What I was trying to attain was a sound that almost doesn't come out. I told you about stuttering. Actually I don't really stutter, but before I speak I stutter in my mind, and then my cultured self tries to correct that stutter into a clean sentence. And then it comes out like 'Oh, and how are you today?' instead of 'O-O-Oh-h-how are you?' But before it comes out like that you have this stuttering in you. And I wanted to deal with those sounds of people's fears and stutterings.

"So I thought that if everything was set up in a lighted room and suddenly the light was turned off, you might start to see things beyond

the shapes. Or the kind of sounds that you hear in silence. You would start to feel the environment and tension and people's vibrations. Those were the sounds that I wanted to deal with, the sound of fear and of darkness, like a child's fear that someone is behind him, but he can't speak and communicate this. And so I asked one guy to stand behind the audience for the duration of the concert.

"I wanted the sound of people perspiring to be in it, too, so I had all the dancers wear contact microphones, and the instructions were to bring out very heavy boxes and take them back across stage, and while they were doing that they were perspiring a little. There was one guy who was asthmatic and it was fantastic. And in the toilet there was somebody standing throughout the evening. Whenever I go to a toilet in a film theater, I always feel very scared. If nobody's there I'm scared, but if somebody is there it's even more scary. So I wanted people to have this experience of fear. There are unknown areas of sound and experience that people can't really mention in words. Like the stuttering in your mind. I was interested not in the noise you make but the noise that happens when you try not to make it, just that tension going back and forth.

"I think I would never want to go back again to where I was, doing things like that, even though few people have touched this area. Where I'd be so lonely and miserable that nobody understood. And the kind of thing I'm doing now is more understandable. I'm not saying it's better or worse. But now I just want to feel sort of playful sometimes. And when I feel playful, to do something. That's when people seem to understand more or at least accept more.

"I'm starting to think that maybe I can live. Before it seemed impossible. I was just about at the vanishing point, and all my things were too conceptual. But John came in and said, 'All right, I understand you.' And just by saying that all those things which were supposed to vanish stayed.

"Around the time that I met John, I went to a palmist – John would probably laugh at this – and he said: 'You're like a very very fast wind

that goes speeding around the world.' And I had a line that signified astral projection. The only thing I didn't have was a root. But, the palmist said, you've met a person who's fixed like a mountain, and if you get connected with that mountain you might get materialized. And John is like a frail wind, too, so he understands all of these aspects."
Instead of Yoko's self disappearing, she now disappears more into her self. "Everybody wants to be invisible," John says. "Yoko just expresses it."
"When the mouth speaks it is as if not the mouth itself but the silence behind it were pressing it into speech," writes Max Picard. "The silence is so full that it would drive the face upwards if it could not relax and relase itself in language. It is as though silence itself were whispering words to the mouth . . . In silence the lines of the mouth are like the closed wings of a butterfly. When the word starts moving, the wings open and the butterfly flies away."

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